

In Our Image

By John Henrik Clarke (September 1989)

Because what we see about ourselves often influences what we do about ourselves, the role of images and the question of how they control our minds are more important now, in our media-saturated society, than ever before. For the last 500 years, the history of African people throughout the world has been told through the slavery experience—only a short period in our life, considering that we are the oldest of the world's peoples.

There is a need now to look behind the slavery curtain in order to see what African people achieved as an independent people, before slavery. Because this independence existed for thousands of years before Europe itself existed, we should examine the far-reaching power of a European-created media over the minds of the world. Prior to the slave trade and European colonialism, which began in the fifteenth century, most of the peoples of the world had a concept of God shaped by their own culture and their own understanding of spirituality. They generally saw God, or any deity, as a figure resembling themselves. The expanding presence of the European made them consider not only a new God but a new image of God as well.

Because the Europeans did not have enough manpower to control the vast territories and populations they were taking over in Africa and Asia, they began to use the media as a form of mind control, colonizing people around the world, just as they also colonized information about the world. Today the mass media includes every visual object that influences the mind—billboard advertisements, commercials and more, but especially movies and television.

Since we don't usually think of school textbooks as an aspect of the mass media, we don't fully understand that both Black and white children have a misconception about the role their respective peoples have played in the development of civilization. Because of the exaggeration of the lives and achievements of Western heroes, especially Christopher Columbus, school children in general are of the opinion that most of the world's explorations and discoveries were made by Europeans. They also believe that Europeans went on discovery missions to other countries in order to spread Christianity and civilization. The contrary is true in many cases. In their expansion into Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands and the Americas, the Europeans destroyed many old and well-functioning societies, usually for political or economic gain. The mass media has given us another picture of this phenomenon in history, and we have forgotten a recurring fact of history—that is, powerful people never have to prove anything to anyone. And by extension, powerful people never apologize to powerless people for the actions they take in order to remain in power.

Because of the prevailing one-dimensional view of history that generally favors white people, who control the textbook industry, African American students throughout the country began in the 1960's to call for Black-studies programs to correct come misconceptions about African people in world history. Twenty-one years ago (i.e. 1968, editor), I and others with similar concerns established the African Heritage Studies Association. Its purpose was to bring together scholars of African descent who would dedicate themselves to the preservation, interpretation and academic presentation of the historical and cultural heritage of African peoples, both on the ancestral soil of Africa and in the diaspora in the Americas and throughout the world.

I have no illusions about the role of the mass media in mind control, and I know that we will have to be more aggressive in calling for change and that we must develop the personnel and the funds that will give us some control over at least part of the mass media. We can start by developing programs, textbooks and newspapers that cater to the African people of the world and will also be of interest to others. We need to seriously question and challenge the educational system that gives direction to our children. We also need to establish an independent educational system, starting in our homes.

We will have taken one giant step forward when we face this reality: Powerful people never teach powerless people how to take their power away from them. Education is one of the most sensitive arenas in

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the life of a people. Its role is to be honest and true: to tell a people where they have been and what they have been, where they are and what they are. Most important, though, the role of education is to tell a people where they still must go and what they still must be.

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